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ABSTRACT

Many early childhood educators are beginning to experiment with and use portfolio assessment. Teachers are also observing young children at play and documenting their play activities for assessment purposes. Close observation of sociodramatic play gives teachers accurate perspectives on young children across the developmental domains of communication and cognition, and the aesthetic, physical, social, and emotional domains. However, insights gained through observation can be lost without some form of documentation. Teacher observations can be documented by means of checklists, rating scales, anecdotal records, photographs, and audio or videotaping. In addition to student work samples of writing, artwork, and individual or group projects, portfolio assessments should include documentation of children's sociodramatic play. (MM)

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SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY: ASSESSMENT THROUGH PORTFOLIO

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SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY:
ASSESSMENT THROUGH PORTFOLIO

Abstract: Assessment of young children's progress continues to be a controversial and complex issue. Many early childhood educators are beginning to experiment with and use portfolios assessment. Teachers must observe children at play and use a variety of assessment methods for documenting these observations in constructing portfolios for each individual child.

Sociodramatic play refers to children's pretend play when two or more children take on related roles and interact with one another (Waite-Stupiansky, 1989). During play, children act and react to each other's language and actions. Play themes are shared among participants.

While solitary pretend play can begin early in the toddler years, the more highly developed sociodramatic play usually begins between a child's second and third birthday and becomes the most prominent play choice between four and five years old. Children often imitate real-life experiences they have had or they have witnessed. Make-believe also enters into their play from books they have heard or television programs they have watched. Play themes develop and evolve as children cooperate with each other and as this type of play continues (Frost & Klein, 1983).

Through close observation of children's sociodramatic play, an adult can learn much about young children and their development.

Benefits of Sociodramatic Play

Sociodramatic play provides benefits in all areas of development of young children. While engaging in pretend play with other children, they construct their own meaning of how the world around them functions (Piaget, 1962). They are able to experiment with various roles and take control of both the familiar and the frightening through self-selected play themes. One child may take the perspective of an adult and care for others the way he sees his parent caring for him. Another may use scary noises and body movements as he works through his own fear of monsters (Waite-Stupiansky, 1989). Social competence and peer relationships are often cemented during play. Children use play themes to initiate interactions with other children, to maintain relationships, and to resolve interpersonal conflicts (Black, Puckett, & Bell, 1992). Sociodramatic play also stimulates language development, broadens concepts, and leads to acquisition of knowledge (Smilansky, 1968).

Sociodramatic Play in the Classroom

Early childhood teachers generally recognize the importance of sociodramatic play and provide opportunities for children to explore the world through play. Nearly all classroom or childcare environments for young children includes a home center, complete with furniture, plates and silverware, kitchen utensils, and dolls. Children use this environment to take on the role of caretaker for their pretend family. They act and react to each other, using words and actions they've observed in significant adults in their lives. In addition, they experiment with beginning and maintaining friendships with peers in this comfortable setting.

More creative teachers enhance sociodramatic play by offering other popular play themes, such as doctor's office, grocery store, bakery, or fast food restaurant. Teachers often extend the activity by including children in planning and gathering props for new

centers. Children take on new roles in these centers and experiment with different ways of interacting with each other.

While dramatic play centers are part of the early childhood classroom, pretend play does not occur only in centers created for this purpose. Pretend play also occurs when children construct airports in the block center, open restaurants at the math center by compiling and "selling" manipulatives as food, and check out books in the reading center turned library.

Play is very important to young children. Sociodramatic play, complete with role-taking and play themes, will occur with or without teacher planning. However, a rich opportunity for observing young children will be gained if sociodramatic play is included in curriculum planning and assessment methods.

The Teacher's Assessment of Sociodramatic Play

While teachers of young children usually provide many opportunities for sociodramatic play, few use this activity for assessment purposes. What can early childhood educators learn about children from careful observation of their play? What are the logistics involved in observing and documenting young children as they engage in sociodramatic play?

Close observation of sociodramatic play gives teachers very accurate perspectives of young children across developmental domains: communication, cognition, aesthetic, physical, and social/emotional. These observations can inform both teachers and parents about the development of individual children. Over time, these observations can show progress in all areas of development. Observations can also direct curriculum planning, when the teacher is sensitive to play themes and indications of emerging skills in particular students.

However, insights gained from very close observation of young children can be lost without some form of documentation. At the moment of observation, teachers may believe that they will always remember the incident and the insight gained from it. That is not true. Memory is short-lived, especially considering all the incidents that occur in active early childhood classrooms.

Many methods are available to early childhood educators for documenting observations. These methods should be carefully considered by teachers to determine which they are most comfortable with and which offer ways to document their students' developmental growth. Evaluation of young children should be an ongoing process which incorporates a variety of assessment methods.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment has been proposed as one of the most effective methods of providing a rich depiction of individual children and for showing a child's growth over time. Portfolio assessment is an ongoing process and evidence of progress is provided through a variety of documentation methods. Teacher observations could be documented in the form of checklists, rating scales, anecdotal records, photographs, audio and/or video taping. Student work samples of writing, artwork, and individual or group projects, should also be included in children's portfolios.

A portfolio is more than just a collection of papers. It must be a systematic collection of documented teacher observations and student process/product. All portfolios will not look alike. Each must fit the context of the program and the individual student. Early childhood teachers should examine each method of assessment and determine which methods would best document the behaviors under consideration for individual children.

Checklists

A checklist is one of the easiest instruments to use for documenting some behaviors. They simply indicate whether a behavior has been observed or not.

Checklists can be developed by teachers according to their own needs and can be marked quickly. For example, a teacher may wish to document mathematical concepts observed in students. Counting eggs and a collection of 15-bean mix could be added to the home center. Children will incorporate these items in their sociodramatic play themes without direct instruction. Certain mathematical-related behaviors can be anticipated by the teacher, such as identifying the number of objects in a set, using vocabulary to designate quantity, forming groups according to attributes, and ordering objects by size. These anticipated behaviors could be the basis of a teacher created checklist. The pre-printed checklist form could be marked quickly when any child working in the home center demonstrated one or more of those behaviors.

Different checklists can developed for use in different centers, especially when the center has been set up to elicit certain behaviors in children.

Teachers do not always have to anticipate behaviors. A blank checklist forms can also be created. Teachers can quickly note the behaviors observed during a play episode, mixing areas of development on the same form as they are observed. For example, issues surrounding self-identity such as directing the play theme or standing up for their own rights, could be on the same form with prosocial behaviors such as showing concern for someone in distress, helping another child do a task, or waiting for their turn without complaining (Beaty, 1990).

Rating Scales

Rating scales are similar to checklists, easy to develop and use. But rating scales add an additional dimension to documenting observations. Rather than simply indicating whether or not a behavior is observed, rating scales help indicate how frequently the behavior is demonstrated. Rating scales are typically organized on a five-point, likert-type scale. Numbers 1-5 can represent a generally defined continuum or descriptors such as: never, seldom, occasionally, frequently, always. If a teacher is trying to document a behavior like cooperation, a checklist would be inappropriate. Few children always, or never, cooperate. Rating scales allow the observer to note about how often a behavior is seen.

Certain centers may elicit behaviors the teacher is looking for if the center is well equipped with materials related to those behaviors. If the home center is organized with a variety of print-related materials (children's books, blank paper, grocery list forms, newspapers, grocery store circulars, telephone books, pencils, and markers), young children will demonstrate literacy behaviors with which they feel comfortable during their sociodramatic play. They may "read" favorite books to one of the dolls or to each other. They may indicate that they realize that print is read from left to right as they move their fingers under the text as they "read." They may use logos that are posted on the wall or found on food cans and boxes to copy onto grocery lists. A teacher can quickly circle the frequency that literacy behaviors are demonstrated by children at play.

By following the lead of the children in their play themes and adding different items to a center, a totally different set of behaviors can be observed. When students turn the home center into a restaurant, the teacher can offer items which support their restaurant theme. With the addition of different kinds of pasta and counting buttons which serve as pizzas for the Italian restaurant, more math-related activities can be observed.

A single rating scale offers a limited view of a child. However, the same rating scale comparing literacy behaviors completed at the first of the year and again at the year of the school year can graphically depict a child's development in reading and writing behaviors. Rating scales are not limited to emergent literacy behaviors. Teachers can develop their own rating scales based on their knowledge of their students and what areas of development they wish to assess.

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records are written descriptions of a single incident in a child's behavior that can be significant to understanding the child (Wortham, 1990). Each one of these records include a description of the incident in its context: the date, the time of day, who was involved in the incident, where it happened, what type of development was observed, and who observed the incident. The observer must be careful to use objective language in writing the incident. Any comments or insights gained from observing the incident should be noted outside the description of the incident itself. A single anecdotal record may provide only limited insight into a child or his developmental stage, but these records gathered over time can provide valuable information in any or all of the developmental domains.

It is important to note that anecdotal records cannot usually be written immediately following the incident. Early childhood classrooms are very active places. While children are present, the adult should be actively involved with them, therefore, anecdotal records are actually written during break times or after the children leave for the day. Therefore, as incidents occur, teachers should jot down abbreviated notes so the critical elements will not be forgotten. The objective language can be written later.

Work Samples

Children's creations must be included in their portfolios. Children do not always write in the writing center or draw in the art center. These activities often occur within the context of their play themes, and teachers should look for work samples created within children's sociodramatic play. These spontaneous creations are important indicators of children's developmental progress and should be preserved in their portfolios.

Writing samples collected over a period of time demonstrate increased knowledge about how print is used, what letters represent, and letter/sound correspondence. Drawings and paintings show increased creativity, use of line, color, and form, and the ability to produce representational artwork. Number-writing and problem-solving exercises show progress in both fine motor skills and understanding of mathematical concepts.

Dictation should also be included in portfolios as children's work samples. Examples are stories they tell related to their drawings or block structures they've built, story retellings or literature responses, predictions about story endings or math activities, and science observations.

Photographs

Photographs are similar to anecdotal records in that they capture one moment in time, but a collection of photographs of a child at work in centers can provide important information. For example, photographs, taken over a period of weeks or months in the block center, are the best way to depict a child's progress in spatial relations accomplished in the block building.

Audio Tapings

Audio tapings can be used for assessing communication development. Typically audio taping is used for story retellings, "reading" of stories created by children, interviews, and music activities. Transcribed versions of the audio tapes are helpful in evaluating developmental progress. However, valuable information can be gained from merely placing a voice-activated tape recorder in a dramatic play center when the teacher cannot closely monitor that center. The taped interactions between children can be reviewed at a later time for indications of many different behaviors.

Video Taping

Video tape can be used to record special projects, events, performances, or center play. Video tapes can be made of children during outdoor play. Over a period of time, these tapes provide excellent documentation of developing large motor skills. Videotaping children as they write, draw, or play with puzzles and legos clearly shows their stage of fine motor skills.

Video tape is an especially good method for evaluating sociodramatic play episodes. The teacher or a classroom volunteer can video tape children as they engage in different play themes throughout the year. Viewing these tapes at the end of the year can provide information about children's oral language development, how they interact with others, glimpses into their social and emotional development, and how complex their play themes are at the beginning of the year compared to the end of the year.

Conclusion

The sociodramatic play of young children can provide teachers and parents important information about a child's individual development. This information can be lost without close observation and proper documentation. Portfolio assessment is an

excellent method to use to capture this information. The variety of assessment tools used to construct portfolios allows sociodramatic play to be included in evaluating where the child is developmentally and in assessing progress made over a period of time.

Narrative or oral summary of each child's developmental progress should be based on the contents of that child's portfolio and on the teacher's knowledge of child development and the curriculum of the school or center. Portfolios should not be used to compare children. They should be used to evaluate individuals' progress over time and to help teachers more accurately plan curriculum and meet individual students' needs (Grace & Shores, 1992).

While sociodramatic play should not be the only activity of children used to compile their portfolios, neither should it be overlooked. A child's play must be included in the assessment process if an early childhood teacher is assessing the child holistically. Play is a major part of a child's life. Interactions with peers, their play themes and the increasing complexity of a child's play warrant equal acknowledgement and documentation as the areas of literacy, mathematical, and aesthetic development.

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